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Israel's gaming of the 'Iranian threat'

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Western news media has feasted on Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's address before the US Congress and the reactions to it. It was a rare political spectacle, rich in personalities in conflict with each other.

But the real story of Netanyahu's speech is that he is continuing a long tradition in Israeli politics of demonising Iran to advance domestic and foreign policy interests.

The history of the practice, in which Netanyahu has played a central role going back nearly two decades, shows that it has been based on a conscious strategy of vastly exaggerating the threat from Iran.

In conjuring the spectre of Iranian genocide against Israelis, Netanyahu was playing two political games simultaneously. He was exploiting the fears of Israelis associated with the Holocaust to boost his electoral prospects, while at the same time exploiting the readiness of most members of the US Congress to support whatever Netanyahu orders on Iran policy.

Netanyahu's primary audience was the Israeli electorate. He was speaking as a candidate for re-election as prime minister in an election that is just two weeks away. His speech was calculated to play on the deep-rooted anxiety of Israeli voters about outsiders who may want to destroy the Jewish people.

FEAR OF THE PERSIANS: Netanyahu reminded his Israeli audience, “In our nearly 4,000 years of history, many have tried repeatedly to destroy the Jewish people.” This was an obvious allusion to the annual Jewish ritual at Passover of repeating the warning that “in every generation they have risen up against us to annihilate us.”

But Netanyahu drew a parallel between the story in the book of Esther about a “powerful Persian viceroy ... who plotted to destroy the Jewish people 2,000 years ago” and “another attempt by another Persian potentate to destroy us.”

Netanyahu was taking advantage of what Chuck Freilich, the former Israeli deputy national security advisor, calls the “Holocaust syndrome” or “Masada complex” that is woven into the fabric of Israeli politics.

His ranting about Iran intending to wipe out the entire country appealed especially to his Likud constituency and other Israelis who believe that the outside world is “permanently hostile” to the Jewish people.

Other Israeli prime ministers have played the Holocaust card for domestic purposes too. Yitzhak Rabin actually started this during his tenure as prime minister from 1992 to 1995, pointing to the alleged “existential threat” from Iran in order to justify his policy of negotiating with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO).

It was also Rabin who established the propaganda theme of Iran as a terrorist threat to Jews across five continents, which Netanyahu continues to cite today.

PHANTOM OF GENOCIDE: Later, however, Netanyahu would use the alleged Iranian threat to do exactly the opposite: refuse to reach an agreement with the Palestinians. Many former senior military and intelligence officials have never forgiven Netanyahu for what they consider a reckless policy toward Iran that they link to his failure to deal with the Palestinian problem.

The demonisation of Iran has also served Netanyahu’s political interest in manipulating the policy of the US government and other world powers. By portraying Iran as bent on the genocide of the Israeli Jews, Netanyahu has sought to get the Americans to threaten war against Iran. The hope is for a real military confrontation that would lead to an actual war with Iran that would reduce that country’s power.

A key element in Netanyahu’s manipulation of the United States and other states has been the suggestion that if they don’t take care of the problem, he may be forced to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities.

He has failed to achieve that maximum objective, but he has been successful in his lesser objective of getting the United States to organise a system of “crippling sanctions” against Iran.

RABIN AND THE NUCLEAR THREAT: The portrayal of Iran as a serious threat to Israel's existence has been serving Israeli diplomatic interests ever since Rabin reversed more than a decade of low-key policy toward the Islamic Republic.

He suddenly began claiming that Iran would have nuclear weapons and missiles capable of hitting Israel within three to seven years and appealed to the United States to stop it. The government even hinted in January 1995 that it might have to attack Iran's nuclear reactors (Iran had only one), as it had done against Iraq 12 years earlier.

Rabin, though he did view Iran as a threat to Israel in the long run, deliberately exaggerated the Iranian threat, as one of his advisors later acknowledged, in part to ensure that the United States would continue to see Israel as its irreplaceable ally in the Middle East and not be tempted to come to terms with Iran.

In fact, as Rabin's director of Mossad recalled two decades later, Israeli intelligence still considered Iran as ranking much lower than Iraq and other threats to Israel during Rabin's tenure, because Iran was still preoccupied with Iraq and would have no missile that could reach Israel for many years.

Mossad has also repudiated Netanyahu's political manipulation of the Iran threat. Since 2012 at least, Israeli intelligence agreed with US intelligence that Iran has not made any decision to try to acquire nuclear weapons. And several former Mossad chiefs have taken the unprecedented step of openly rejecting Netanyahu's use of the term "existential threat."

"EXISTENTIAL" DANGER DISMISSED BY MOSSAD:

Tamir Pardo, the current chief of Mossad, has said that a nuclear Iran would not necessarily pose an existential threat to Israel even if it did acquire nuclear weapons. His predecessor, Meir Dagan, who made no secret of his disdain for Netanyahu's handling of Israeli policy towards Iran as dangerously reckless, said flatly in 2012, "Israel faces no existential threat."

Another former Mossad chief, Ephraim Halevy, also criticised Netanyahu for talking about an "existential threat" from Iran.

Interestingly, Netanyahu stopped using the term in his speeches to the pro-Israel lobby group American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and Congress, while continuing to make the claim that Iran has genocidal intentions toward Israel.

Netanyahu's dishonesty on the subject of Iran is best documented by the fact that he was so persuaded by Mossad's briefing on the subject when he first became prime minister in 1996 that he appointed the Mossad briefer, Uzi Arad, as his national security advisor.

He also abandoned the Labour government's exaggerated depiction of the threat from Iran's nuclear and missile programmes. For six months, the Israeli government stopped claiming that Iran was threatening Israel.

ISRAEL'S FEAR OF A US-IRAN RAPPROCHEMENT: What induced Netanyahu to start selling Iran as a menace to Israel was not any new evidence of Iranian interest in nuclear weapons, or hostility toward Israel. It was the fear of rapprochement between the Clinton administration and the newly elected Khatami government, and the hope of depriving Iran of what was assumed to be Russian assistance for building missiles that could reach Israel.

Netanyahu was alarmed by the signals from both Tehran and Washington in the summer of 1997 indicating interest in reducing tensions between the two countries. That would have represented a real threat to Israel's political and strategic interests, and he was determined to cut it short.

Netanyahu's response was to start to begin sending messages to Iran through other governments that Israel would carry out pre-emptive strikes against Iranian missile development sites unless it stopped its ballistic missile programme.

It was a reckless tactic that would not cause Iran to stop working on missiles, but could provoke a much tougher Iranian public posture toward Israel. That, in turn, would allow Netanyahu to put pressure on the Clinton administration to steer clear of any warming relations with Iran.

Netanyahu's indirect threats did cause Iran to focus on the potential threat from Israel in its missile programme, making Iran and Israel strategic adversaries for the first time.

Netanyahu bears personal responsibility for having created a conflict with Iran that had never existed before. But it is not the conflict that he has been alleging all these years.